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ABSTRACT

Based on the idea that a healthier, saner and more creative classroom is possible, this book presents an extended case study of the behavior of two fourth grade girls, focusing on their writing. The book argues that the data gathered from observing students can lead to changes in the classroom and improved teaching practices by providing teachers with an understanding of the diversity and individuality of their students, which would otherwise be overlooked or unknowable. (RS)

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READING YOUR STUDENTS

Their Writing & Their Selves

Anne Martin

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CS 211 741

Teachers & Writers Think/Ink Book 3

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Their Writing & Their Selves

Anne Martin

Teachers&Writers
New York

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To Pat Carini

I have never been able to think abstractly about a classroom or to plan a program before I meet the children. When I began to teach fourth grade after many years with primary grades, I wanted to know more about my nine and ten year olds and what was important to them. I suspected that their writing could offer some clues. I decided to collect as much writing from the whole class as I could manage, and to focus particularly on the work of the most interesting writers through the year. As my somewhat haphazard collection rapidly accumulated, I soon realized that *all* the children's work was extremely interesting when I examined it over a period of time. Pieces that seemed dull, trivial or puzzling when they were written, suddenly made more sense when viewed as part of a larger body of work, and placed in the context of the child's whole school life. Even in the work of my most reluctant writers, I could discern distinct themes and images, recurring over and over with many variations. While in the past I had noticed that children had characteristic writing styles, I had never examined children's work consistently over a longer time span, and I was fascinated by what I was seeing.

What had originally attracted me to teaching was a great curiosity about children, probably the same wonder at human variety that made me an avid reader of fiction. From my first teaching in nursery school, I was compelled by children's play, conversation, questions and activities. As I watched, listened and responded, I started to sense the special world each child lived in, a world that generally connected to the one I perceived, but with highly idiosyncratic twists. The more I got to know the children, the more they revealed to me their own perspectives and reasoning. Soon I began to jot down salient incidents and conversations, take down quantities of stories by dictation and save art work retrieved from the floor and wastepaper baskets. It was many years before it occurred to me that my compulsive scribbling and bulging files might have some use, that they were actually

a series of eloquent pointers toward children's thoughts, concerns, special interests, and often their obsessions, fears, joys, satisfactions and sense of humor. Unknowingly, I had been collecting signposts to a deeper understanding of the children I was teaching, and I wanted to learn to read them better.

Since I liked to write and had already published some essays about younger children's writing,[1] I planned to document whatever I found out about the fourth-grade children and their work. Having only the vaguest ideas of what I was looking for, I merely gathered my materials, looked at them carefully, and wrote descriptions of the words, rhythms, content and themes of the children's writing. What happened then, in the process of my own writing, seemed almost magical to me. As I examined the children's work and described it as accurately as I could, the material seemed to yield its own meanings. The more closely I concentrated on the details of the writing, always linking them back to the whole piece and other pieces by the same child, the more I could understand about the work and the writer. Instead of starting out with theories about the children, I was being led by the work itself into succeeding levels of perception that gradually brought me deeper into each child's thinking.

I was getting really excited about my discoveries and was in the midst of struggling to record them when, by chance, I came across the work of Patricia Carini, Director of the Prospect Center in North Bennington, Vermont. The astonishing depth of Carini's child study, and her thorough, systematic methods of documentation were precisely what I had been groping for on my own. My subsequent study with Pat Carini extended and illuminated all my thinking, as I continued my account of the children's writing. The major part of that work was published by the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation[2] and a shorter section by *Outlook*.[3]

This current book, an addition to my previous study, focuses on two fourth-grade girls, whom I shall call Brenda and Jill, and their writing. Both girls were competent writers, although Brenda generally found writing more of a release than Jill, who tended to complain that she couldn't think of what to say. Jill was typical of her school population in that she came from a white middle-class professional family, though she belonged in the half whose families were intact, both parents living together with their children. Brenda also lived with both parents. She was one of the small number of Black inner city children who came to our school through a voluntary busing program. Although the population of our public school in a suburb of Boston is becoming increasingly diversified, with many nationalities and cultures represented, there are still not many Black children living in the neighborhood. The inner city children are usually accepted easily as part of the group, at least in the elementary grades, but they feel the difference and strain of being transported from the city to the more affluent suburbs. Aside from their differences in background, Brenda and Jill were radically unlike each other in temperament and interests, which is the principal reason I chose to contrast them in this study. Yet, in both cases, their writing afforded me insights into them that I probably could not have gained any other way. Sometimes it is through examining likenesses and differences in children that we begin to see the basic characteristics of each child's approach to learning.

My fourth-grade classroom was self-contained, one of the few rooms still enclosed by walls after the drastic renovation of our school building. As the only "open classroom" middle-grade teacher in an open space school, I felt fortunate to have a closed room which gave me the freedom to try things out. Assigned work for the class was usually listed on the board as daily requirements which I explained to the children at morning meeting. While these requirements could vary from day to day to include

reading, math, social studies, science and the arts, writing was a firm requirement every day. I had noticed that a large number of the children seemed anxious about writing. Unlike my primary children whose problems were mostly lack of muscle control and unfamiliarity with notation, many of my fourth graders had inhibitions connected with content, acceptability, correctness and expectations. I reasoned that the children might lose their fears of writing if it became a constant part of classroom life, growing out of our experiences and relationships. This is in fact what happened.

We exchanged writing, read it aloud, posted it, talked about it, published it in a class magazine that was read also by parents and other family members. The children wrote stories, poems, narratives, journals, letters, jokes, riddles, cartoons, scripts for plays, reviews of films and books, fantasies, dreams, memories, sportscasts, TV ads, signs, posters--anything they or I could think of. Not all children wrote copiously or well, and most of the products were not outstanding, but all children were expected to put some effort into writing, and they generally did. De-emphasizing the product (after all, most adult writing efforts are not models of perfection either) and concentrating on the process helped to make writing a live, growing activity, more akin to experimenting with art materials, which children usually like to do.

In order to stimulate the writing process and to supply the tools and confidence the children needed, I exposed the children to a variety of books, literary styles and forms that we frequently discussed as a group or in private conferences. Throughout the year, I tried out numerous class assignments as a bridge to children's self-motivated writing. My aim was to help each child find his own voice, to become increasingly able and confident in expressing himself clearly. I found I could help children write better if I approached writing as a shared craft to be worked on together, rather than a "skill subject" in which the children

perform and the teacher judges the product. As fellow practitioners, we were free to discuss the difficulties of our trade and to enjoy its satisfactions. We made corrections and changes for the sake of clarity instead of compliance with abstract standards.

Whenever the children finished their required assignments, they could choose their own activities. I spent as much time thinking about and planning for the children's "free time" (as they insisted on calling it) as I did on prepared lessons. I felt that this part of the day was the most valuable in furthering children's independent learning, and that it was important for me to provide each child with choices that would stimulate growth. My knowledge of the children was crucial in this area. Using Jill and Brenda as examples, the last section of this monograph discusses some of the ways in which I applied what I knew about the children in making daily and long-range decisions about curriculum and teaching.

Beyond the pleasure of seeing more deeply into children's lives, the data gathered from observation and children's work (not only writing, but arts, crafts, math, etc.) can lead to changes in the classroom and improved teaching practice. More subtly, it can increase a teacher's sensitivity and open up new ways of looking at children. Finally, in the face of increasing pressures on teachers from so many sources, and the difficult conditions within schools, perhaps the only way to retain enthusiasm for teaching is to refocus our vision onto the children, and to allow ourselves to be renewed by their unique interpretations of the world.

JOY SONG

I walk around feeling happy,
I sing at the top of my lungs,
I feel something inside me,
That I can't keep in much longer.

Chorus:
It's joy joy joy I have to let it out
joy joy joy it makes me feel real proud
joy joy joy so when I go out to play
I have to have a lot of joy.

When I go bike riding
I have a lot of fun.
And everything I do
It comes out with a yell.

Repeat chorus

When I go to school
as happy as can be
I have to let out my joy
to keep me company.

-- Brenda

CHARLIE

Please come Charlie to my house
You really are the guy
Whenever you're not with me
I always start to cry

Charlie you are nice
You're really handsome too
Whenever you come over
I like to sing with you

Charlie you're the great one
You're really something new
When I'm at the park
I'm always near you.

Charlie you are nice
You're really handsome too
Whenever you come over
I like to sing with you.

-- Jill (with Cathy)

These are two very different responses to the assignment to write a song--both highly competent in the use of language, obviously knowledgeable about song rhythms and form, and absolutely typical of each child in spirit and content. Brenda and Jill were very intelligent fourth graders and good students, but so different in style and temperament that I think they hardly said a word to each other all year beyond the necessary classroom contacts. A careful reading of what they wrote, rounded out with some classroom observation, gives us some insight into two contrasting ways of looking at life.

Brenda and Jill approached life from quite different starting points. Brenda, a big, noisy Black girl who bounced around the room in expansive movements, was all enthusiasm, uninhibited emotion,

non-stop talking, active participation in everything. Jill, beautiful, dainty, accomplished in academic and artistic areas, seemed always calm, cool, competent, in control of herself and any situation. Where Brenda let her feelings run away with her, alternately in fits of elation, excitement, anger or depression, Jill was outwardly pleasant and neutral. One of Jill's first poems, written in September, reflects her own calm detachment:

Pebbles just sit there
daydreaming by and by

It was hard to know how Jill really felt, whereas Brenda's feelings were all too evident. When Brenda came in the room early in the morning, yelling, singing, jumping around, asking questions, I would have to beg her to simmer down a little and let me gather myself together for the day. She took it in good humor, telling me that her mother said the same thing to her at home. Jill's performances for the class were deliberate, some excellent dances and skits which she practiced with her best friend, Cathy, outside of school or at recess.

Brenda had a hard time making friends, since she had such passionate ideas of what she wanted, and almost no inclination to compromise and accept other people's suggestions. She often ended up sulking, unhappy and lonely. Jill purposely isolated herself from everyone except Cathy (and sometimes Emily who was in and out of favor with the two others during the year). Envied and admired by the rest of the class, Jill was also criticized for her exclusiveness by many of the children who would have liked to become her friends. She seemed unmoved by either the admiration or the criticism, remaining quite unpretentious but also remote.

Brenda's writing varied with her mood of the moment. She could become inspired and write feverishly for hours, or else she might be angry and refuse to write a single word. However, she generally felt positive about writing and sometimes

continued working on writing ideas at home or on the school bus. Jill had a much harder time getting started on writing assignments. Although verbal expression was easy for her and she was fluent in giving class reports or participating in skits, she often hesitated for long periods before writing, complaining that she had nothing to say or didn't know what to write about. While Brenda's papers were quite legible, she didn't mind first-draft scribbling, crossing out, erasing, correcting, so that her papers were sometimes messy. Jill's handwriting was exquisite--beautifully formed letters, perfectly spaced, and there were never corrections on her papers.

Brenda's "Joy Song" is obviously about herself, and not the impersonal "I" of some folk or popular songs. The first stanza is an accurate description of Brenda's behavior when she is feeling good, walking around, singing loudly, bursting to tell people. The second and third stanzas deal with the ordinary things in Brenda's life--bike riding, going to school, shouting. The chorus also talks about going "out to play" but it juxtaposes this daily routine with strong feelings that have to be expressed and that make her feel "real proud." Not only is the exuberance constantly with her, but it seeks release in a totally unembarrassed pleasurable yell. In the last stanza, the joy has a new function as a companion to Brenda. It has become personified to "keep [her] company." That unexpected twist suggests that Brenda's strong feelings act as a substitute for human companionship, the need to supply her own gratification. The only rhyme occurs with the words "be" and "company" (although "out" and "proud" is a near-rhyme) which emphasizes the last line even more strongly. The phrase in the chorus, "I have to have a lot of joy" seems to refer back to feeling proud. In order to maintain her pride in herself, she needs to cultivate and express a noisy enthusiasm which fends off loneliness.

Since we think of loneliness mostly as a quiet, sad mood, Brenda's insight into her own excessive

boisterousness as a way to surround herself with a protective aura is rather extraordinary. As I thought about Brenda's behavior during the school day, I realized that when she was involved with other people or materials, she could settle down quietly, with good concentration. It was mostly in transition periods, times of stress or excitement, that she became almost unbearably demanding and insistent. The activities in her song appear to be solitary and also transitional ones--going somewhere, riding a bike--and therefore would tend to be times when she needs to rev herself up to high joy to avoid feeling lonely.

At the same time, the song is a rhythmic, lively hymn of praise to that overwhelming physical sense of joy that children seem to be able to feel more easily than adults. I can remember at the same age the urge to run down the street on a beautiful crisp autumn day, the joy of being alive that has to be expressed in a spontaneous physical way. Brenda has captured that beautifully, in her special unselfconscious style. What appears at first glance to be a rather simple childish imitation of a pop song is actually an acute insight into Brenda's own behavior and a very effective evocation of the overpowering experience of strong feelings of joy.

Jill's song, "Charlie," is much more controlled. Though it is a kind of love song, the feeling seems restrained, with even the word "cry" used here as a necessary rhyme and thus somewhat divested of its emotional quality. The very regular beat and the consistent rhymes in the second and last lines of each stanza carry a sing-song rhythm that is lulling rather than stirring. Charlie is characterized as "nice" and "handsome" and a good singer, which gives the suggestion of a teen-age idol. That impression is strengthened by the phrases "You really are the guy" and "You're really something new," and the idea that the park is their meeting place. However, unlike a rock star on TV, Charlie is available to the singer since he has come to her

house and apparently comes quite frequently to "sing" with her. Or at least in fantasy he is a friend, since it is not clear how much of the contact is real and how much just wistful longing.

In the first line, "Please come Charlie to my house," the unexpected inversion makes the plea stronger than it would have been if Jill had written "Please Charlie come to my house" or "Charlie please come to my house." In the same way, the last line of the third stanza, "I'm always near you," catches attention by not scanning as well as all the other lines. The missing syllable makes it stand out from the other very regular ones. In those two places, the song moves away from cliché phrases or standardized teen-age culture and seems more original. Jill's preoccupation with precision is evident in her neat stanzas and careful repetition of phrases. The song combines the tradition of folk songs (where "Charlie" is a frequent name, and in at least one song a dandy and a lover) with contemporary teen-age lore. Since Jill is only nine, it doesn't quite come across as either a teen-age love song or a casual folk-play song, but hangs competently and only slightly uneasily in between.

There is detachment in Jill's song, a definite staying away from stronger feelings than "nice" ones, but there is also involvement with rhythm, rhyme, patterns, and a couple of unusual lines. Jill has used her ability to control words and phrases to explore two different traditions of song writing, and she has pretty nearly succeeded in welding them into a plausible whole. Where Brenda is dealing with the raw quality of emotion, Jill gives us a much more polished, crafted piece of work.

This comes out more clearly in two Color poems assigned in class.

White is a dancing horse.
Yellow is the life and health of a sunny day.
Orange is the sun on a lazy day.
Red is in the autumn leaves falling.
Pink is the rain drizzling down.

-- Jill

Violet seems like poison it's sometimes a nasty color.
Violet is sometimes like a petal on a rose just sitting
there as sweet as can be, just waiting for someone to
come and admire her or someone to come and water her.
Soon a lovely farmer with red suspenders on came.
The farmer was as sweet as can be.
Black. One day love has gone
she's lonely yes lonely the day was all black
sweet little rose had then died
but wait she didn't die
she was turning a color the color was blue
yes she had 99 babies
for she was the first rose mother of all roses.

-- Brenda

Jill's poem is a series of images, written in parallel structure, each one self-contained but also subtly connected to the others. So when we start with a white horse dancing, we go on to yellow as life and health, which suggests the vigorous grace of the horse in the sunshine. The sunny day leads into an orange "lazy" day, and the color orange leads naturally into the red of autumn leaves. The last line is more surprising, because pink is not usually associated with rain, but the progression from red to pink is a natural one, as is also the connection between falling leaves and falling rain, so we can make that leap and enjoy the image of pink

rain (which may also recall spring blossoms in the rain, thus leading us back around the seasons). The progression of colors, from dazzling white to warmer shades and then cooler pink, and the vividness of a "dancing" horse, "a lazy day," and rain "drizzling down" give the poem movement in spite of its static form.

Although nothing human is mentioned in Jill's poem, there is an implied person communicating the richness of nature in its variety and beauty. But the involvement is not an active one. It is that of an acute, somewhat detached observer.

Brenda's color poem is all passionate personal involvement. The first image of violet as "poison" and "nasty" sets the tone of prophetic warning. Even though the color is transformed into a rose "as sweet as can be," waiting wistfully for a lover, there is obviously some danger lurking near. This turns out to be the loss of love which leaves the rose "lonely yes lonely," immersed in blackness. It's not clear whether the "lovely" farmer actually betrayed his rose or whether fate intervened, but the loneliness of love lost leads to the black of death. And yet there is resurrection. The color changes to the blue of hope, and the rose becomes the original "mother of all roses," bearing "99 babies."

Where Jill's poem is a series of tightly constructed observations, Brenda's poem flows on in narrative form, telling us a story as it unfolds. We are right in the scene, watching the farmer with his "red suspenders" come to the lovelorn rose. The repetition of "sweet as can be" to describe the farmer suggests a whole warm love relationship. Then the single word "black," followed by the stark statement "one day love has gone," conveys with stunned suddenness the change of atmosphere. The pathos of the repetition of "she's lonely yes lonely" is followed by the dramatic contradiction of death ("but wait she didn't die"). And the ending is a joyful affirmation of the ever-continuing cycle of death and birth, reassuring us of the

continuity of life in the face of sadness and loss. In this poem, Brenda is connecting us intimately with the larger design of life, and in her rhythms and phrasing there is a hint of mythology, combined with a flowing stream of consciousness. The colors are used mostly for their symbolic value to provide a framework for the changing events of life and death. The story of the rose is both a very particular and a universal one, and we are drawn into it as participators rather than spectators.

For another example, here are two camera stories, assigned as part of our photography project:

ADVENTURES OF A CAMERA

Hi! My name is Candy Camera. I'm all rusty now but I still remember those good old days when I was all shiny. I remember when a lady bought me. I was scared. She almost bought me for $100. I said, "Hi!" The lady jumped. The man at the store said he did it. Then I said, "No, he didn't. I did." The lady screamed and ran away. Then the man at the store got mad and said, "See what you did. You better not do that again." "Okay," I said.

A while later another lady came in and asked what my name was and I said Candy. The lady bought me because she thought that the man in the store said that my name was Candy and she also thought that Candy was a brand name. The man was glad to get rid of me. And I was glad to get rid of him. First the lady had to put film in me. She didn't know how. She pushed me and pinched me. OW! OW! She took a picture with me of a boy jumping up and down. It came out blurry. So she gave me to the junkyard.

-- Jill

I ONCE WAS A GIRL BUT NOW I'M A CAMERA AND THEN TURN BACK INTO A GIRL

Once upon a time I was sitting in my room when a witch came in my room and said, "Do you believe in witches, deary?" and I said, "No, I don't believe in witches. My mother said there were only witches in Salem and that was a long time ago." And the witch said, "You better believe in witches or I'll turn you into a camera."

And so the witch came back. "Now do you believe in witches?" "No," I said to the witch and so she turned me into a camera and I had feet. Have you ever seen a camera with feet before? Well I walked down the street and I noticed something. Everything looked very small when I went close to it but when I went far from it, it looked big.

One day I went to see a clown at the circus and I had to walk back a bit and I walked right into a truck. So then the spell broke and I turned back into a girl. And then I believed in witches.
The moral of the story is: Don't mess with witches.

-- Brenda

In these two stories, the differences between Jill and Brenda's outlooks are again demonstrated. Jill's story is a skillfully constructed memoir of a discarded camera, told with precision and humor. The camera wages a losing battle to be recognized as a live, sentient being. She tries to make herself heard, is reprimanded by the store man whom she dislikes and who resents her, is mishandled by a clumsy woman, fails to achieve a good picture due to circumstances beyond her control, is thrown away to become old and rusty. All that is left is the memory of once being beautifully shiny. Although

scared of what the future might hold, the camera starts out by asserting herself, insisting on talking and scaring the customers. The store man's threats don't stop her, but he succeeds in tricking the second lady into buying her. After that, the camera becomes a passive object that is painfully pinched, and expected to take a clear picture of a subject in motion. Failure means instant rejection. The interaction between characters is hostile or insensitive, expectations of performance are extremely high, and there is swift and permanent punishment for imperfect results. A camera is supposed to record clearly and accurately, otherwise it is useless.

Brenda's story is hardly about a camera at all, but about transformations, as the long title indicates. It deals with faith, reason, power and relationship. The girl who is challenged to believe in witches refuses to do so, citing her mother as authority. She is threatened with a transformation, but still sticks to her beliefs. Thereupon she is changed into a camera and, since she still has feet, she explores the world and finds her vision changed. "Everything looked very small when I went close to it but when I went far from it it looked very big"--the opposite of human vision. When one day she wants to see a clown and has to back up to see it better, she collides with a truck which breaks the spell and turns her back into a girl. She now believes in witches but gives a warning to others not to "mess with witches." Reason and authority have proved to be unreliable, the world can be seen from different perspectives, the supernatural has coercive power. A man-made invention can break the spell, but it's dangerous to fight the irrational.

The punishment in this story comes not because of imperfect performance but because of a refusal to believe in the witch even when that witch appeared and talked with the girl. The evidence of the senses is rejected on the basis of previous authority, and the transformation seems almost an

object lesson. If you don't believe what you see, you'll have to become a seeing machine. Interestingly, the seeing machine itself contradicts the evidence of the senses. The girl is punished by having her vision distorted. However, the very distortion (the need to step back to see clearly) carries within it redemption, and the girl is released from the spell. She now believes in her senses and own experience, but she doesn't recommend it to others. The implication is that it's a painful process to suffer change. As in Jill's story, the interaction between characters is hostile, a power play, but this time the end result is a learning experience rather than absolute failure. In Brenda's story, assertiveness is also challenged, but the girl does not become passive and crushed. She emerges a different, and perhaps stronger, person, one who has experienced something difficult but survived it.

Jill works with detail, logical development, effective use of longer and shorter sentences, a circular form where the end of the story brings us back to the beginning which promises to tell why the camera has become rusty now. Brenda's story, from its unwieldy title until its humorous moral, seems thrown together haphazardly rather than constructed. It has a quick spontaneous flow from one sentence to the next, without much thought of where the story is going and why. Jill has a precise, neat story idea, while Brenda's story is not really worked out or developed. Jill's story is seen at a distance through a camera lens, while Brenda's takes us in and out of focus. Jill deals with the manageable, while Brenda is often overwhelmed by the large unmanageable parts of experience.

SELF-PORTRAIT

My best friends are Cathy, Martha and Emily.

I like to dance, tap dance, do magic, swim, skate in the winter, play the piano and do pottery.

I like to eat pizza, cream cheese, spanish rice and cranberry and banana bread.

I have a lot of favorite colors like red, orange, yellow and white.

Some of my favorite games are Jet World, Life and Clue.

-- Jill

SELF-PORTRAIT

I have black hair. I look pretty. I'm fat. I have lots of friends and lots of enemies and I get mad a lot. I have lots of feelings. I have very short patience.

I like foods like spinach and pizza and tacos, and cheeseburgers and macaroni and cheese. I hate fried potatoes and turnips.

My favorite colors are red and green and I don't get along well with people. And I love math and I'm 5'3". I forget a lot. I like to play Racko and I like to be around little kids because I have a little nephew. And I wear size 7 shoes.

-- Brenda

The self-portraits, both taking up the suggested subjects of friends, favorite foods, colors, activities and games, bring out the salient qualities of both children. Jill is confident, accomplished in a variety of areas, and has no doubts about her friendships or choices of favorite things. There is no physical description, no expression of feelings or conflicts, no negative comments, no

indication of particular personal traits. The tone of her portrait is that she is protecting her privacy and is fulfilling the bare requirements of the assignment. She is doing it conscientiously by including her real interests and likes, but she'll be darned if she reveals anything further about herself.

Brenda, on the other hand, bursts out all over the place. She is not only pretty but fat, she has not only friends but also enemies, and furthermore she might deserve them because she is impatient and gets mad a lot. She has feelings and lets them be known. Her relationship to food includes hate as well as liking, her thoughts about colors immediately remind her of conflicts with people, and her love for math makes her remember some important numbers like her height and her shoe size. She likes to play games and she also likes to care for younger children. She doesn't explain what it is that she "forgets a lot." There is no attempt to conceal herself or produce a neat summary. Whatever comes to mind is thrown in freely, and the result is a picture of a lively, warm, active, if not altogether easy person.

It is not surprising that Jill, with her high standards, her tendency to tie things neatly together, her highly organized, structured thinking, would find it difficult to loosen up and write spontaneously the way that Brenda could. On the other hand, Brenda found it next to impossible to write a reasonably objective account of a science experiment, which Jill could do easily. Here is what they wrote after experimenting with making plasticine boats:

> *Jill:* I was trying to make the clay float. I made the clay float with two straws for a few seconds. First I made the clay into a ball. Then I flattened it down. Next I cupped up the edges and I put the straws in. But before I did that, I just flattened it out and put it in the water and it sunk. When the sides were up, it floated.

Brenda: I'm the second best--49. One more and there would be two world records. I'm next to Jamie. It was really fun playing with the clay. But what I think should be stopped is having the clay thrown around by some kids that haven't been trained. There should be a stop to all this.

When I talked to Brenda about writing up experiments rather than personal stories, she reluctantly revised it to this:

I was trying to put some marbles in some clay and trying to make it float in a hemisphere. Then I tried to put 50 marbles in it but I could only put 49 in it. I turned out to be the second best in the world champion.

Although factual writing was obviously not Brenda's style, she did learn to moderate her passionate personal involvement in some cases and use her observational powers less subjectively. But she still didn't like to do science writing. Here is an observation of a plant, written in the spring:

I see a plant growing wild.
It started off with two leaves but now
it has five leaves.
The leaves are soft they look
like a rainbow with all its colors.
Flowers are
starting to sprout some
of the petals are like rubber
that's what I see in this plant.

-- Brenda

Just as Brenda tried her hand at more consciously controlled writing, Jill sometimes relaxed her controls somewhat while experimenting with freer forms. As an exercise in automatic writing, Jill

came up with this piece which was quite unusual for her:

CRAZY

The half man half girl said hello goodbye
The rat's ear ate the tomato grease
Too many brothers sister oh me oh my
The whale kissed the elephant
The yak played with the kitten

-- Jill

Jill was both pleased and surprised at the result, but carefully labelled it "crazy" to show what she thought of it. It's not actually that crazy. By allowing herself to recognize paradox and ambivalence in the world--the androgyny in all of us ("half man half girl"), the contradictions in our communications, the basic connection of the most unlike creatures--Jill could also express a basic concern that she could otherwise never have approached directly, her ambivalent feelings about having "too many brothers sister oh me oh my." As the oldest of three with a new sibling expected in the family, Jill was extremely mature, sometimes seeming calmer and more controlled than adults, according to her mother. Generally, her attitude towards her younger sister was one of tolerant amusement.

Jill was in many ways an ideal student--intelligent, gifted, verbal, pleasant, beautiful, conscientious, neat, artistic, well behaved. But she was paying some costs for her very high level of achievement and her maturity. She rarely showed enthusiasm, stuck closely to one friend and pointedly refused contact with other children, filled her after-school hours with extracurricular lessons yet longed for more free time, had difficulty in committing herself to writing, tended to be a passive observer rather than a participant. In her cool self-possession, she seemed less like a nine

year old than a secretive teen-ager, and indeed some of her writing reflected the desire to get into that next stage of life:

> On Friday my friend, her sister, their cousin and I played beauty parlor. My friend was first. And her sister was the one who did our hair. You would have to pick a picture in a magazine. Then she would do your hair like in the picture. My friend's hair came out good. So did her cousin's. When it was my turn she put this towel around me. Then she wet the brush and brushed my hair and blow-dried it, then she brushed it again. Then she took out the curling iron and made curls on both sides. She left the back straight. When I was done we all got into dresses and she put make-up on us. Then we showed our families. That was the best day of vacation I had.

Sometimes it seemed as though Jill herself longed to be able to let loose a little more. In her skits for the class, she often managed to act silly parts or indulge in some horseplay. In several of her poems and stories, there seems almost a wish to explode or be "turned on":

> Dynamite is like lightning
> blowing up. The rain
> exploding down. A hailstorm
> is thundering.
> CRASH! BOOM! BANG!
> All of a sudden it will stop
> then it will be quiet again.

THE BEAR'S RECORD PLAYER

> Once there was a record player sitting in the forest. He had no one to turn him

on so he couldn't work. Then one day this bear came along and he didn't know how to work the record player. By accident he turned on the record player. It was the Monkeys. He liked it and started to dance. Tra-la-la.

Jill was aware of her difficulties in getting started on writing, and because she was such a good student it bothered her that she was often blocked when other children were writing easily and fluently. Throughout the year, I had many conversations with Jill when she complained she had nothing to write and no ideas. We talked about how hard it is to get at our thoughts and be able to articulate them in writing. It was only at the end of the year, in writing an evaluation of herself, that Jill could finally admit a change from the attitude of "I don't have anything to say" to the acknowledgement that in fact her thoughts and feelings were not readily accessible to her. Here is her evaluation, written in the third person as a mock teacher report to a parent:

Dear Mrs. Brown,

Your child Jill loves reading. She is very good at it also. She likes all kinds of books.

She is good at math (multiplication, division, addition and subtraction) even though she hates it.

In her writing she doesn't always get all her thoughts down on paper even though I know that they're all up there.

She has self-control unless she is fooling around with Cathy and Emily.

In her free time she plays Scrabble and Rack-o.

Sincerely,
Jill's teacher

Just before summer vacation, Jill's mother had a baby, the fourth child in the family. For many weeks before, Jill had been tense, a little rebellious, unable to concentrate well on her work. Yet she never talked about personal concerns, as a lot of other children did. She stuck even closer to her best friend, Cathy, and remained more aloof and seemingly more impervious than ever. A couple of days after the birth of the baby, she responded to a fantasy vacation story assignment by writing immediately and fluently, without her usual problems of getting started. This time there was no hesitation, no long periods of distraction. She worked with intense concentration. I don't know what her feelings were about the new baby, but this story is clearly related to a birth fantasy, and perhaps writing it was a release for Jill.

> Over the summer I went to Cape Cod. One day I was deep sea fishing and got a tug on my line. I pulled and pulled and I couldn't pull it in. Woops! It had pulled me in. It was a shark and it swallowed me. It was very dark inside the shark. I tried to kick it, punch it and beat it up. Suddenly the shark stopped short and then he started to struggle because he was caught in a net. There was a fishing boat that put the net down with bait to catch sharks. And the shark that I was in was hungry so he went to get the bait. They brought the shark up onto their boat. The shark died and I kept screaming and I opened the shark's jaws and climbed out. I was fine but out of breath from screaming and since it stunk so much inside the shark that I had to hold my breath. Since then I can't see Jaws or even go fishing!

While Jill was struggling with her own reticence and looking forward to being a teen-ager, Brenda was thinking about her grown-up life in the more distant future:

When I grow up I bet you that I'll never marry a man who wants my body. Lots of men do that, they try to take advantage of you. That's why women have to watch out who they marry. If I get married I'll marry a man who is going to take responsibility to care for a baby and to help around the house.

From the first, it was evident that Brenda, a big heavy girl who loved to eat, was preoccupied with food a great deal of the time. Much of her writing revolved around food. Here is a dialogue poem done early in the year:

MOUTH AND FOOD

Hey mouth, how come you're
always chewing on me? I guess I'm
hungry. Well can't you stop chewing
on me? If I do I'll die. That would
be nice for a change wouldn't it.

Here is Brenda's account of an ideal imaginary vacation:

On my vacation I went over my grandmother's house. And I stayed overnight for two days. For breakfast we had eggs and bacon and toast and coffee. It was good. For lunch I had hot dogs and a can of tonic. It was good too. Then when I finished I watched some television. Around five o'clock I had dinner. For dinner I had fried chicken and rice. It was good. Then I stayed up till eleven o'clock. And the next day I spent the night and had the same things because bacon and eggs and hot dogs and fried chicken and rice taste nice.

This is a spontaneous poem about her father:

COOKING

People cooking their breakfast
in the morning are sometimes in a hurry.
My father cooks all day long
and when he cooks everything
smells so good that when
he gets home he loses his appetite.
And when he's at work the smells
is his breakfast and lunch and dinner.

And a kindergarten memory:

When I was in kindergarten two we always had watermelon if we were good. They brought six watermelons and we each had five pieces. When I was eating mine, juice was running all down my face and I licked my face and said yum yum.

It was not until the end of the year that I realized that food meant not only enjoyment to Brenda, but that ingesting it (being "fat") was an important protective device for her. Food is life, and being without it, or "skinny," suggests death. One day I had a note from Brenda's mother telling me that Brenda would miss school the next day to go to her grandfather's funeral. My initial reaction to what she wrote that day was surprise at what seemed like such a casual story. It was only later, and after another piece of writing, that I began to understand what she was saying:

On Sunday April 17, 1977, I went over my grandmother's house. It was fun. I had two dollars. I had the time of my life. For dinner we had chicken and rice. It was delicious. I wish I could have chicken and rice every night. That Sunday I slept with my grandmother. That's the day I found out my cousin got killed, and my mother said I had to come home. On Tuesday I had a lot of fun with

my nephew. My nephew can wave goodbye and say goodbye. He can say mama and dada. When I ride him in his stroller he always said, "Eeeee!" He can say "Uhoh," "Bwoo Bwoo Bwoo" and spits. My sister has me go to the store for her, but I make a lot of money doing that. I made two dollars and fifty cents. I had the time of my life.

Embedded in this cheerful account is Brenda's grappling with the contrasts of life and death. The phrase "I had the time of my life" occurs twice, once just before the description of a good meal, and the other at the end after she has mentioned another family death and then quickly veered off to more pleasant family associations. She is reassuring herself with the thought of food, nurturing new life (her nephew), the power she can gain from earning money. There is an almost visible struggle in this piece to push out the thoughts of death and to assert life.

A few days later, she was dealing directly with her fears and sadness:

I remember when my grandfather died, last Tuesday. It was a sad funeral. The night before the funeral on Monday, my mother let me spend the night at my grandmother's house. She said that I didn't have to go to the wake. I could not sleep at all on the night of the funeral. I felt like my stomach was going pop and I would be skinny. The next night I slept better but I got up at eleven and got back in bed and I got up and was sleepwalking. The next day I came to school and that was the end of it, until on the third night I slept all night.

That she described her feelings mostly in terms of physical manifestations makes this writing particularly true and poignant for me. Our deepest feelings are experienced physically, and the gradual

tapering off of physical symptoms--being able to sleep once more--are indications for us that life can continue and become better again.

To summarize the two very different approaches to life as demonstrated by their writing, it might be illuminating to look at two longer pieces done by Jill and Brenda in the latter part of the year. Jill's is an adventure story not assigned by me, on which she worked for many days, and Brenda's a never completed projection of her future life which was part of a class family study.

THE SIGN MYSTERY

One sunny morning I was walking along the sidewalk and I saw this big sign in front of me. It said, "Turn left and walk six steps." I did. I turned left and walked one, two... three...four...five...six...steps. There was another sign. It said, "Turn right and take three steps, then turn right again and take five steps, then go left and take four steps." I turned right and took one...two... three...steps. Then I turned right again and went one...two...three...four...five... steps. Then I turned left and went one... two...three...four...steps, and there was another sign.

By then I was pretty tired. I felt like going to sleep. ZZZzzzzzzzz. OOPS! I'm sorry for falling asleep. But I'm so tired it's hard to stay awake. Well, I can't stay here all day. The sign in front of me said, "Go straight eight steps and go down a ladder into a tunnel that is hidden by bushes. You will see a cart. Get in it and wait."

I did. I walked one...two...three... four...five...six...seven...eight...steps. I had to hunt for the hole for at least fifteen minutes. Finally I found it. The sign was right about the hole being hidden. Well,

I went down the hole and sure enough there was a cart and I got into the cart and waited.

Suddenly I felt myself moving. I was going down, down, down. I went faster and faster. There was hardly any light but up ahead I could see a wall!!! It was twenty feet away, then ten, five, four, three, two, one, JUMP, CRASH, POW, BOOM! Phew! I jumped just in time! I think someone is out to kill me.

I was leaning on a rock and suddenly it gave way and I fell down on this stick and there was a big rumble under me. I saw a piece of big rock slide open. There was a big stairway. I couldn't decide if I should go down or not. I decided to, because if I didn't the story would soon be over. So I did. At the end of the stairs was a tunnel going down.

I thought I was in the middle of the earth by now. I went down it. At the end of the tunnel was a huge rock. I leaned on it and a wall opened. Behind the wall was tons and tons of GOLD! I didn't think there was that much gold in the whole world! I couldn't move. I was frozen stiff. My mind went blank so I couldn't think. After about five minutes of blankness, I knew that I should look for a name on a stone. Soon I found a rock that said, "To who dares find it." Then there were some words I couldn't read. I thought I should go to the police station. I took forever to get back to the police station. When I got there I was half sleeping. The officers kept asking me questions and I kept falling asleep. The next thing I knew I was in my bed. That day I took the police to the GOLD! For my reward, they gave me the money.

EPILOGUE: I got married and had children. They're grown up now. I gave most of the

money to Good Will but with the rest I got a mansion. Now I have about 100 maids and butlers.

-- Jill

Jill's story of adventure contains many of the elements of her other writing. It is neatly constructed, told economically, mostly in short precise statements, and has a logical story line.

The action seems to be narrated by a frequently detached participant who sometimes takes us out of the story completely to point out the arbitrary fictional aspects of this adventure. The character persists in obedience to directions, even when she is tired, and is rewarded for her success in doing what she is told and/or for making it possible for the story to continue. There is humor in the slightly satirical handling of the traditional story elements and the semi-romantic ending. This is an exploration, but Jill remains in control of it, except for the five minutes of blankness at the end of her search. There is a persistent longing for sleep (in which the sleeper temporarily gives up control). When she finally has fulfilled her responsibilities and is allowed to sleep, she is still in power afterwards because she knows where the gold is. In her future life she plays an accepted female role (wife and mother), makes a generous gesture towards society, and then is allowed to exercise her own power freely in her household.

For Jill the virtues are intelligence, control, precision, accomplishment, humor, detachment, responsibility. And perhaps along with all this there is also the sneaking desire to let it all go for a while (to "sleep") and let events take their own course. But that is dangerous, so it's better to remain responsible and follow the signposts to success, a challenge that requires courage and persistence.

MY FUTURE

After I graduated I left my home and went to Georgia to live. I got married to a man named Scott Boone. He had a lot of money about fifty dollars that was enough money for about a hundred and fifty animals. Well one day I told Scott that I was going to get a job. He said "Hu hum" as if he didn't care until I said, "I'm going to be a teacher." Then his eyes lit up so you could hardly look in them. And as if I could of known he said, "Well I'll have to buy you some books so you can study."

Scott was the kind of man who loved children as much as I do. And when I told him I was going to be a teacher he was happy that I would have the opportunity to be with children.

After a couple of years teaching, they made me the secretary. When I told Scott he said, "No wonder they assigned you secretary, you were the top teacher."

Well after a few months I felt queer so I went to the doctor's for a check-up and he said, "Well Mrs. Boone, here's some happy news for you. You're nine months pregnant." When I got home I told Scott the news. He was overjoyed but of course I would have to quit my job until the baby was here and Scott said, "So what, you're going to have a baby and we're going to have a big feast." "But before we can have a feast we have to invite someone," I said. Then Scott said, "Do you know anyone to invite?" And then I said, "There's Susan, Carrie, Kim, Sherly and Crisy. That might be enough people."

After nine months I had a baby girl. We called her Beth J. Boone. She was cute too. When Beth was nine years old she learned how to swim so we decided to go swimming. I was

surprised that I could do the backstroke. After swimming we went for a ride to Howard Johnson's to get some ice cream. I had a buttered pecan, Beth had a buttered pecan and a piece of apple pie, Scott had maple walnut, a cheeseburger, a strawberry shake and French fries. Then I quit my job and became a housewife.

Well one day Beth asked me, "Mommy, what does my grandmother look like?" And I said, "I can't describe her but if you really want to know we'll take a ride over there tomorrow." So I really asked for it. When we went over to my mother's house Beth's eyes were wide open waiting to get one glance at her. While Beth was exploring the house, I had a talk with Scott. We had a discussion about whether we should let Beth stay with grandma tonight. We finally made up our mind and when we went in my mother's room there was Beth playing with my mother. We asked her was it O.K. and she said, "Yes, she can stay but you'll have to go home and get her night clothes." So we left Beth with grandma and they went back to playing. Soon we were back with Beth's night clothes. When we walked in the house, mother was reading Beth a story. Beth was sitting on grandma's lap. And mother was reading Harriet the Spy.

-- Brenda

Although unfinished, this story tells us a great deal about Brenda: her concern with relationship, her serious thoughts about adult life, her pleasure in the details of everyday human interaction. The conversation and sometimes startling family developments draw us closely into the story. Again food is a symbol of life and joy, essential for more than physical growth. The family unit is self-contained, but there must also be friends to

share with, and the family itself extends back into its past and forward into its future.

Brenda's writing always has a large dimension, a wide sweep that takes in generations, life, death, God, morality. Because they include so much, Brenda's stories tend to be incomplete, loosely structured, sometimes careless and seemingly disconnected. For instance, in this story many questions arise, such as why the child didn't meet her grandmother much earlier in her life, why the mother quit her job when Beth was nine, etc. But Brenda's concerns are not with neatness or control. She wants to throw herself into direct contact and involvement with the whole world. That is bound to lead to some confusions, conflicts, messiness. But it also leads to warmth, sympathy and understanding. (As a matter of fact, it was Brenda who patiently nurtured her friend, David, throughout the year, in all his times of irrational outbursts and violent anger.) Brenda's writing conveys her enthusiasm about life, her passionate connectedness to her surroundings and to other people.

Jill and Brenda will undoubtedly change some in their writing and their relationships, as they did during the year in my class. But I suspect that their basic approaches, their deepest concerns, will not change too drastically through the years. They have both developed very particular ways to meet experiences, and to communicate something of themselves.

Some basic questions are likely to arise in response to my comparison of Jill and Brenda. Why would a teacher spend such an inordinate amount of time and energy on the details of one or two children's work? Is it necessary, or even helpful, to gain such particular knowledge about a child? How does a teacher's insight make a difference in her teaching? Shouldn't a teacher concentrate on skills to be taught, and on lessons for the whole group? Aren't teachers already overburdened by the demands of children, parents and administrators? A discussion of these issues requires some consideration of the ways in which children learn, and how teachers can try to facilitate children's learning.

It is often said that children are not learning what they are being taught by their teachers. Sometimes that statement is meant to disparage the children's quality of attention, and sometimes it is meant as an indictment of a teacher's effectiveness. Teachers are constantly being blamed by parents, or by other teachers further along the line, for not having taught the children certain skills or pieces of information. And children, equally, are constantly being blamed (or worried over) for not learning the right things at the right age and the right time. Actually, of course, children are learning all the time, from their families, other people, the outdoors, the media--all the stimuli to which they are exposed. A child learns through interaction with the world around him. And to various degrees teachers are supporting that learning by the relationship they develop with the child, the materials they provide, and the atmosphere of their classroom. Thus teaching is not a matter of making a presentation that is or is not accepted, but of furthering productive connections between a child and his experiences.

In thinking about setting up a classroom and providing materials, in planning activities and lessons, a teacher is led from an abstract notion of a particular grade level to a consideration of the special group of individuals she has in her

class. She is bound to notice in the children a wide variety of interests, involvement and attitudes which are not correlated to test scores or ability-level ratings. Within a range of developmental similarities and common needs, she is confronted with a bewildering array of divergences. How can she reach each child and help him grow and learn?

It is here that careful observation of the child and the study of a child's work can be so illuminating. Whether they are aware of it or not, teachers automatically observe and register a good deal of what goes on with the children: conversations, arguments, startling comments and questions, sudden breakthroughs--the pulse of life in a classroom that makes teaching so compelling. As anyone who has lived with a teacher can testify, teachers are brimming over with stories of what the children said or did, and often obsessively eager to impart these stories to anyone who seems remotely interested. These stories are not just classroom trivia. They are the substance of a teacher's perceptions, which are in turn the source of insight and responsive teaching. What I am suggesting is that the propensity of teachers to be fascinated with children's behavior can be harnessed and used more consciously as a basis for classroom planning. To begin with, observation is a natural part of all our lives, but it can also be a useful tool if it is encouraged and sharpened in ourselves as well as in the children. The more we become aware of our powers of observation and make use of them, the more (and the more deeply) we see.

Keeping an informal school journal is one way for a teacher to start getting a grasp on the jumble of impressions of a school day. The journal could consist of a few scribbled notes on a particular child, an incident, a conversation, a personal reaction. Some teachers who keep journals like to write for a few minutes at the end of each day, some write in the evening, some write only once or twice a week. Methods of writing, of organizing the material, of capturing events and feelings, are as varied as the

teachers themselves. Journal keeping need not be more time consuming than correcting a few extra worksheets. It does, however, carry the danger of becoming habit-forming. Once a teacher begins to jot down notes, perhaps periodically re-reading them, she may begin to become dependent on a journal as an outlet for the strong feelings and thoughts engendered by the myriad encounters in a school day. Whatever the content or function of a teacher's journal, one consequence is likely to be a greater focus on the children, and a clearer view of the particular way each child approaches life.

When the teacher's sense of the child becomes more vivid, she can think about ways to support him. As I gradually realized how especially difficult transition periods were for Brenda, I tried to ease the strain of the times of day which were most strenuous for her. The hardest time for her was first thing in the morning, coming to school on a long bus ride from another neighborhood. For much of the year, I let Brenda come into the classroom early, before the other children, and bounce around and chatter at the top of her lungs for about ten minutes, to release her tension. I didn't even have to pay much attention to her. My presence in the room was "company" of sorts, and helped her overcome the loneliness of the transition, so that by the time the others came in, she was ready to settle down. During other transition times, I often arranged for her to have a partner or a special task to do. Some forethought on my part reduced Brenda's wildly noisy periods in the classroom. But, even more importantly, once I understood what lay behind Brenda's outbursts, I was able to be more tolerant and less irritated, so that I could handle the situations better. Seeing a child's isolated bits of behavior in the context of a larger view can help to defuse some (though not all!) potentially explosive confrontations.

It is this long-term perspective, the sense of continuity in a child's life, that is so hard to obtain in a school setting where each year in a new

grade is an entirely different experience for the child, often with little carry-over from the years before. With nothing to go on except test scores, report card grades, and perhaps verbal reports (sometimes only teachers' room gossip), a teacher with a whole class of children to worry about does not have much chance to see deeply into any particular child's past school experiences. And one year, out of context, is not nearly long enough to gain insight into recurring patterns or continuing strands in a child's interests and approach to learning. Frequent written observations gathered over long periods of time from many viewpoints can be enlightening, even more so if there is an available file of a child's accumulated work: writing, drawing, clay figures and other tangible products. Ideally, such observations and files can be extended over many years, to be studied by teachers as a guide to knowing the child and planning a curriculum for him, as has been done in some places such as the Prospect School in Vermont,[4] or the five-year Indepth Study of the New York State Experimental Prekindergarten.[5]

However, even under the ordinary circumstances of difficult teaching situations in public schools, it might be possible and worthwhile to do some less extensive collecting of children's work, and to follow through on some observations of individual children. The observations can be done by the teacher and perhaps by sympathetic colleagues, student teachers, guidance personnel, possibly administrators. Parents and outside personnel can often add a different view to round out the picture. Keeping a file of the children's writing in Jill and Brenda's class, discussing the classroom and children with a good student teacher, taking notes and thinking about what I was seeing, made me more conscious of curriculum possibilities and what effect they might have on individual children.

Realizing that Jill (among others) needed encouragement to mix with more children, I often had small groups work together on assigned projects and lessons. For Jill this opened up contact with

other members of the class besides her few chosen friends. For Brenda, who claimed she didn't have friends, these groupings provided a way for her to be included in a task that required interaction and mutual dependence. (Brenda wrote in her self-evaluation that while at first she had "a very hard time trying to make friends," she now had "nine friends.") At the same time, I provided plenty of opportunity for self-chosen groups to form around math and word games or arts and crafts. For Jill, the easy availability of a variety of arts and crafts materials allowed her to make excellent use of her neatness, organization and the ability to carry through on ideas. For Brenda, it offered a way to channel her prodigious creative energies into painting, printmaking, weaving, and other open-ended activities that imposed their own limits and constraints.

The Friday afternoon tradition of "Play Day"--a period to perform for the rest of the class any drama or act that had been practiced during the week--gave Jill a chance to cut loose and act silly, and Brenda a chance to indulge her dramatic impulses in a structured setting. On one of our first Play Days, Jill and her close friend Cathy, those two mature little girls, came up with a skit of blatant toilet humor (to my amused surprise), only to resume their prim remoteness afterwards. And Brenda wrote and acted a wonderfully lively family dialogue. Throughout the year, organized opportunities for drama remained an outlet for Jill, and a disciplining structure for Brenda's effusions.

While small-group work, time for individual activities and much attention to the arts would be valued in my classroom every year, the particular forms they take are determined by the special needs of specific children within the class. In this class, songwriting became an important aspect of our work, mainly because of one child, David. An intense, highly intelligent boy who loved music, David had trouble writing anything, both because his upset feelings interfered and because his poor coordination made the physical act of writing

difficult. Somehow he hit on the idea of writing songs, the one form that inspired him to sit down and concentrate for long periods. The rest of the time, his violent, unpredictable behavior landed him in severe trouble. The only child who consistently remained friends with David was Brenda. One day, David and Brenda became carried away with an idea and spent a couple of hours in the hall writing a song together. They were extremely proud of the results, which they performed for the class, David behind the scenes playing drum with his pencil on a chair, and Brenda singing a quite plausible melody which so impressed the other children that they kept singing snatches of the chorus afterwards. The page of our class magazine devoted to this song turned out to be the one most read and giggled over by the class (and some parents too, I think):

HOW COULD I DO WITHOUT YOU?

How could I do without you?
I go to my room and think
about you in my heart
and how could I do without you?

I eat so much ice and I
think you're so nice
and how could I do without you?
I like you so much that
my heart needs a crutch.
How could I do without you?

Without you my heart's filled with blue
I can't live a second without
my beautiful peasant so
how could I do without you?
My heart's filled with pizzards
because I can't jump like lizards
so how could I do without you?

My heart is like a ball and
my stomach's like a wall so
how could I do without you?
I can't take a step because
I don't have any pep so
how could I do without you?

I can't go through a door
because my muscles are sore
so how could I do without you?
I don't have any lamps because
all my friends are tramps
so how could I do without you?

I don't have a house because
my house got gnawed by a mouse
so how could I do without you?
I don't have any pipes ever because
all are stars and stripes forever
so how could I do without you?

I don't have a patio and
I don't have a radio so
how could I do without you?
So I finally got married
and I'm very happy so
howwwwww coulddddddd IIIIII doooooo
withoutttttttt youuuuuuuuuuu?

-- Brenda and David

For David, collaborative song writing was one way to use his excellent language ability in written form, to get appreciation for his humor, and to work in harmony with another child. For Brenda, it was not only those things, but also an opportunity to mother and nurture someone who needed her. All through Brenda's writing runs the thread of close family ties, her own solid place in her family and a church-centered community. Her remarkable sympathy for others was not always evident in her peer relationships, where she tended to be bossy, but it

provided openings for tolerance, not only with others but with herself. "We should try it again because we're just beginners" she once wrote in an evaluation of an activity. Brenda loved working with younger children in the school, and she took on the job of managing David's erratic behavior with the same interest and zest. Her ambition was to become a teacher, and I thought she would be a good one. Jill, on the other hand, did not seek to gain self-respect from working with younger children. She already took on responsibility for her younger siblings at home, and she preferred to see herself as a teen-age babysitter rather than mother or teacher. (In the middle of the year she asked to be called "Candy" and signed all her papers with that name from then on.)

Books--both those read by the teacher to the class, and those that children read themselves--are a rich source of common ground in a classroom. Books can be listened to, argued over, re-told, discussed, re-read, passed on to each other. I always spend a great deal of my time after school in the library. Selecting books for an individualized reading program, I try to keep in mind the interests of particular children. For Brenda, I often looked for a variety of family stories, and for folk tales and mythology which would deal with large subjects in stylized and beautiful language. For Jill I looked for books that posed some of the dilemmas of early adolescence in a thoughtful fashion. For Brenda, our long study of Black history reinforced her self-identity and pride in her community ties. For Jill, my emphasis on personal family history involved her in an absorbing study of her own family tree. Both girls wrote extensively on memories of their early childhoods, which helped to make some connection between their younger selves and present-day selves. And because Brenda and Jill were not the only children who were concerned with family relationships or problems of adolescence, the books I selected for them to

choose from were also of great appeal to other children. Similarly, the sports books I brought for Bobby, the animal books for Jamie, the mystery books for Ruthie, would be passed around to other children. My selection of books with particular children in mind generated enthusiasm from those children, which then spread to others.

The same thing happens with any materials chosen for particular children. When Jonas, who is intrigued by paradox, became fascinated by the optical illusion pictures I provided, other children were drawn to these materials for reasons of their own. When Santha, who is unsure of her abilities, was asked to extend a multiplication chart to tables beyond 12, other children also invented charts of their own to hang around the room. If curriculum is built around actual interests of the children in the class, the materials provided are bound to involve other children who have similar concerns or else use the materials for different purposes. Children's responses to curriculum topics and materials based on observable needs are likely to be much more positive than to curriculum designed on some abstract notion of appropriate "skills" presented in an arbitrary scheme. Unfortunately, schools are flooded with expensive kits, teacher manuals, elaborate "sequential skills" charts, and "learning materials" which often bear no relation at all to children's own ways of learning, thus resulting at best in a waste of scarce resources, at worst in feelings of failure for children and teachers.

In a backward, roundabout way, this approaches the question we started with: why a teacher might invest so much time and energy in studying minutely the work and behavior of one child. The insights gained about one person are bound to shed light on others also. We are all connected with one another. Our memories of our own childhood, our understanding of one child, allows us to perceive all children more sensitively.

But can we trust these perceptions? Aren't we bound to be subjective? Is there a danger of false interpretation or over-interpretation? There are some safeguards to keep in mind. The foremost is probably the realization that we can never fully understand anyone, even the people closest to us; that people are incredibly complex and ultimately unknowable, so that we must always be open to new impressions, changes, an aspect we never came across before. In view of that, it is important to keep to *description*, instead of labels, judgments or psychological jargon. In that way, we can always re-examine the same data for new meanings, in the light of more material or a different understanding of the person. A false impression can soon be corrected by further experience if we are open to new interpretations. The more precise our observations are, the more varied the perspective and longer the time span, the more likely it is that our knowledge is sufficiently grounded to be reasonably accurate. The test of time, other people's observations and further experiences are always good correctives.

Perhaps the best test of whether the teacher is on the right track with a child is the reaction of the child himself. Children who feel accepted and recognized by a teacher may give some indication of this awareness. These signs can vary. It might be a five year old's whoop of delight when the teacher (who has noticed his messy juice drinking) sets up a bubble blowing experiment; or a reluctant nine-year-old reader coming up for air after an hour's absorbed reading, saying, "This is the best book! Can you find me another one like that?"; or an exceptionally verbal ten year old saying with pleasure during a conference, "I didn't know anyone knew so much about me!" Even if they give few overt signs, children can tell when a teacher responds to them on the basis of respectful thought rather than stereotyped answers. It is generally not necessary, and perhaps not desirable with children younger than adolescents, to share with them the specific implications of what you

have learned about them. (A direct approach to nine or ten year olds would probably embarrass them, in this extremely self-conscious age when the last thing they want from adults is personal scrutiny.) To varying degrees, a teacher's consciousness of the children's special approaches to learning is bound to inform her classroom practice. It also gives her specific information to share with parents, who usually appreciate some precise insight into their child instead of tiresome report card clichés.

Helping children to become better writers is closely bound up with a teacher's perception of children's diversity. When a teacher is aware of individual learning styles, she can think about providing an environment conducive to each child's progress in writing. On the simplest level this might consist of flexibility in the classroom's physical arrangement. Since each writer has such different requirements for productivity, it might be well to set up some private nooks within the room or in the hall for children who need to write in solitude; some small spaces for children who like to work with or near a friend; some larger spaces for children who can work anywhere or who frequently need help from other children and the teacher. Available writing materials can be varied to include paper of many sizes and colors, and writing utensils of various sorts, such as thin and thick pencils, felt or ball-point pens, and a typewriter if possible.

Daily schedules can be made elastic enough to accomodate a variety of writing rhythms. Some children write best first thing in the morning, while others don't begin to focus fully until later in the day. Some need long sustained stretches of time, while others write in short intense bursts. Some children need help in getting started, while others just want to be left alone to get on with it. Some write shorter self-contained pieces, while others prefer to write long continuing sagas. As a writer who has a hard time working anywhere except in seclusion at a typewriter, I have much sympathy

with children who are expected to produce writing instantly on command in a crowded classroom. It's surprising that children do so much good writing under those circumstances. Teachers who have tried writing assignments along with their classes can appreciate the difficulties, and plan ways to make the environment for writing more comfortable for each child.

Beyond these general provisions for a variety of needs, a teacher's understanding of particular children can be put to more specific use in encouraging their writing. Knowing that Tam was an artist who had a hard time writing, I would suggest that he draw first and then write. After a period of doing this, he became more conscious of his themes and frequently was able to put them into words without intermediary drawings, sometimes more vividly than children who were not as strongly visual. Knowing that Judy expressed herself most powerfully in poetic imagery, I would encourage her to respond to assignments with poems rather than prose. Andre, who was also a poet, often asked to go to the typewriter at odd moments when a poem came to him, and I nearly always allowed him to take time out from class activities before he lost his thought. Even when the results were not spectacular (though sometimes they were), he needed to struggle with his poetic ideas right then, and our class work was of secondary importance to him at those times.

All children needed the option of alternative topics if a writing assignment was too threatening or not evocative for them, and the availability of a teacher's help in finding more suitable subjects or forms. Sara needed to talk over her writing ideas with me as she went along; Jonas wanted to be left alone to write reams of adventure stories, and only afterwards stop to clarify, condense and edit. Jane wrote sensitive description while Michael wrote humorous space fiction, and both needed to have their work accepted and appreciated before they could branch out into other kinds of writing. Evidently, there is no one good way to teach writing,

but as many ways as there are children. This should not discourage teachers, but challenge them to keep searching for some entry point to each child's creative potential. When a teacher considers writing a means of releasing thought, and sees her role as helping each child do this with increasing integrity and clarity, then teaching writing becomes an exciting venture instead of a routine "skill subject."

Teaching is generally a lonely profession, with little opportunity for real communication about classroom concerns. It is rare to find schools where teachers work closely and productively together to deepen their practice. While it is infinitely more interesting and stimulating to meet regularly with a group of colleagues to study children and their work, a teacher alone can also grow in her teaching. By sharpening her observation and collecting children's work for examination, a teacher can make astounding discoveries about children and their learning. Every teacher in a classroom is a potential researcher, with penetrating questions, dramatic incidents, vital evidence right at her fingertips. Although it's hard for teachers to flourish on their own, especially at a time when public education is being downgraded so severely, a network of enthusiastic practitioners, supporting each other and building on each other's work, is one way to combat the debilitating weariness that can afflict teachers who feel isolated, overworked and undervalued in their classrooms. If we begin to think of teaching as a means of supporting children's strengths, and if we gear our practice towards discovering these strengths in every child, we will also feel stronger ourselves within our profession, capable of making some difference in children's lives.

Notes

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5. Patricia F. Carini, *The School Lives of Seven Children: A Five-Year Study* (Grand Forks, N.D.: University of North Dakota Press, 1982).

Throughout this book I refer to the teacher as "she" and the child as "he." This is done only to avoid the awkward repetition of "he/she" and "him/her" and should by no means be interpreted as lack of respect for male teachers or female students.

-- A.M.

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